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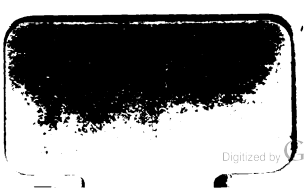

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THE CHURCH

AND

THE DRAMA.

A Sermon

PREACHED AT BRADFORD,

JANUARY 29th, 1865,

BY THE

REV. T. W. FRECKELTON.

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THE

CHURCH AND THE DRAMA.

"Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled nothing is pure; but their mind and conscience is defiled."

"To him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." ST. PAUL.

I AM wishful to speak upon a subject, which, though not unimportant, is somewhat unusual in the pulpit; my topic being "The question of public amusement, especially that of the Drama, considered in the light of Christian Ethics." I shall enter upon my task without offering any apology for taking this subject at such a time and place, because I believe that anything of good or evil, which enters largely into our week-day life, is likely to be best appreciated, or most manfully avoided, as the case may require, when it enters most fully into our Sabbath consideration: and because I hold further, that, as your religious teacher and friend, I owe it as a duty to you, no less than to myself, to speak my thought upon all matters of common interest, as they arise in the community, whether they be good or bad. I shall trust to your good sense and sound judgment, to credit me when I say, that I do not now speak in dogmatic opposition to any person or party, still less at the suggestion of any person or party, but of my own free-will and in all charity; not wishing to sit in judgment upon those who may differ from me, but to pronounce my own opinion, and to discharge my own con-

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science, upon a question of some importance; to look at it seriously and earnestly, as a Christian man who has an anxious concern, no less for the interests of public morality, than for those of the Church and the higher religious life.

For the past many months, there has been a structure in course of erection in a prominent part of our town, which we have all known was intended for a Theatre; and which has been built at the cost and risk of a public company of our fellow-townsmen, who have erected it, as I suppose, because they were convinced that in so doing they were consulting their own interests by ministering to an actual want in the community. On the other hand, there is a large and respectable class of our fellow-citizens who look on this movement with a somewhat impatient disapproval, and with undisguised fear of the consequences upon the morals of the more flexible part of the community, and upon the interests of religion. With these I do not sympathise. I do not share either the disapproval or the fear, but I am far from wishing to meet them either with denunciation or satire. Doubtless, in the main, their motive is good. I think their zeal mistaken, and their fears groundless; but to their own Master these men stand or fall. If they esteem the thing to be unclean, to them it is unclean; and if they think Religion, or public morals, to be imperilled, they have the right to say what they think, and to act accordingly. But it is a poor question that has only one side, or which will not bear examination all round. Although I do not agree with the ordinary opinion of the so-called religious world, on this question, I am not altogether ignorant of that mode of looking at it, for I was brought up, in this respect, from my earliest childhood, in the straitest sect of the Pharisees. But "the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns," and even the last few years have seen in England great modifications of opinion and

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practice on this matter of public amusement. Religious professors have pressed into the charmed circles of the Concert Room, the Opera, and the Ball Room, notwithstanding constant exhortation not to be "conformed to this world;" and I believe it is no uncommon thing for those who would not, on any account, be seen in the Theatre of their own town, or be known to have been there, to patronise the Drama when spending a little time in London, or at a fashionable watering-place. I may venture to say there are now few even religious men, of moderate means, who would like to confess that they do not possess a copy of Shakspeare's Plays; and not a year has passed since Bishop, and Dean, and Canon, even in the pulpit, and on the Sunday, entered into friendly rivalry who should say the most kindly and appreciative word for poor Will Shakspeare, whilome Play-writer and Play-actor at the Globe Theatre, in London. Still the fact remains, that even yet there are many worthy and pious people, who look upon the Drama as a very questionable kind of literature, and upon the Theatre as the "Devil's Church," a place which men and women cannot enter without staining their souls with sin, and the very existence of which can only be accounted for by the total depravity of the human race, and can only lead to sin in its very worst and most seductive forms: and as for Actors, are they not to be pitied and avoided, as men and women who have given unbridled license to their lower nature, and who glory in their godlessness by the very fact that they are members of a profession, into which whosoever enters must pass through portals inscribed, "Who enters here leaves hope behind." Perhaps it will not be too much to say, that among those whose piety is to any degree tinged with asceticism, this is the general opinion, and it is one against which I take leave most emphatically to protest. There are real sins afflicting humanity not a few, violations of divine immutable

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laws of nature, of society, of the soul—laws which rise out of the very nature of things—nay, which themselves are the very nature of things—made inherent in them by God: and there are artificial sins, alas! all too many of them, violations of merely man-made decrees—ecclesiastical figments, sect prejudices, the party fetters of poor opinions "which have their day and cease to be;" and these bind men's souls with burdens grievous to be borne—they unnecessarily harass the conscience into chronic misery, and effectually prevent the disturbed sense of right and wrong clearing itself, by gazing upon the eternal distinctions of things. Struggling vaguely against these imaginary foes begets weakness rather than strength. The commands of God and the vain traditions of men are confounded, and seem to be of equal importance. Only mischief can ensue, if breaking the Sabbath for pleasure, and frequenting the Theatre for amusement; are classed as sins with defrauding one's neighbour from avarice, or killing him from revenge. Surely there are real sins enough in the world—real evils enough to face and conquer—without creating for ourselves, or suffering others to create for us, artificial evils and sins upon which to exhaust our energies and waste our time.

I am far from denying that this strong feeling against the Drama and the Theatre is without cause. No man with any pretension to decency, not to say religion, would attempt to justify or excuse much of the dramatic literature immediately succeeding the Restoration, or some even of a much later date; or to apologise for the conduct and character of many of the actors, and the general influence of the Theatre of that time, or of all Theatres even at the present time. But with respect to customs, amusements, and professions, which are denounced and prohibited as questionable in the interests of morality and religion, there are several questions which should be asked before we arraign ourselves

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against them—such as these: Is there anything to be said in their favour? Is there any good in them? Are there really at least two sides to the question? Is what is questionable in them inherent—a part of them, inseparable from them—or is it only an accident, which care and attention might eliminate? Is there sufficient good in the thing to make it worth while to eliminate the bad, even at the cost of much pains and care? And if so, then how is this to be done? And whose duty is it to do it?

In attempting to answer these questions, the application of what I say, to the subject in hand, will, I hope, make itself sufficiently apparent.

I said, that it is a very poor question which has not at least two sides. Is it not something to say in favour of the Drama, and dramatic representation, that all the evils which have been charged upon it, justly or injustly, have not been able to annihilate it, from the time of the Greeks until this day; and that here, in Christian England, and indeed in the whole of Christendom, the secular Drama has continued to exist, in spite of all its evils, and, added to those, the opposition of the Church, exerted persistently for many centuries, during which—of late, at least—it has grown into increasing power and influence, and, may I not add also, into increasing purity. Does it not begin to seem as if it could not be destroyed? How is this, if it be so radically and hopelessly bad? My answer is—because, as a public amusement, it stands paramount over all others for attractiveness and general interest. I know that it may be replied that therein lies its insidiousness, and its evil; but this reply is only of force when accompanied by a protest against all public amusements whatever; for that only is the most perfect public amusement which is most attractive and generally interesting; so that the question really narrows itself to this: is public amusement at all desirable or allowable for Christian people

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I might dispose of this question summarily, by saying that the Christian people have already settled it for themselves, in having of late openly patronised certain public amusements in some instances, and in many others, even under the auspices of religion itself, instituted amusements of a public character, which only want the outside accessories of costume and scenery to be miniature Theatres themselves. But I prefer to take a deeper basis than this, in the affirmation that public amusements are necessary to the public health and well-being, both physical and mental, and, by consequence, moral and religious also. I do not deny that there is much in the world of sin and evil to sadden the soul of a good man, but sadness loses its solemnity and power if it be made perpetual. Theocritus, the weeping philosopher, was no less a one-sided man than was Democritus, the laughing philosopher. We cannot—we must not always look on the dark side of things, any more than always on the light side. The bow will not stand constant tension; if you would not break or destroy its spring, you must slacken the string at times. I know, that many times and oft, the heart of a true man will ache well-nigh to breaking for the sight of his eyes which he sees, and when he thinks of all the evil which is done and suffered under the sun; but we must not dwell exclusively upon that side. "That way madness lies." We do not refuse to eat because many are starving for food; nor to clothe ourselves warmly because many are in rags and cold; nor ought we to refuse reasonable enjoyment because there is so much sorrow and misery in the world. I know that life is burdened by constant responsibility, and full of solemn duty; but I know also that after rest, the mind springs to duty like an arrow to its aim, or a lark with song saluting the rising sun; when, if the eyes be strained too long into the darkness, or we refuse to loosen the girths which bind the burden to the shoulders, the spirit could only

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grovel in doubt leading to swift despair. Even though the world is dark and evil, thank God! it is not without light and joy also, at times. It is God's world really, and not altogether the Devil's. We must trust in God. Even the darkness is not all dark; there are clear stars in the deep far-off spaces of heaven, and often a kindly moon: nay, already the east is prophetic of the rising dawn! Shall we deny these things, and make conscience morbid and cadaverous by gazing evermore upon the agonies of the dying and the putrescence of the dead? as though God and His mercy were limited to human life and time; while He is carpeting the very graves with grass, and hiding the carnage of battle-fields with flowers.

What if amusement, so far from being a sin, should prove to be a duty to mind and body alike—a divine law which may not be neglected with impunity, or violated without suffering? Life is full of toil, which is beckoned evermore beyond its due bounds by the stimulus of interest, competition, or ambition. None of our faculties can be kept in unbroken strain without danger of collapse; not even conscience, any more than intellect or physical strength. The due exercise of our powers gives us pleasure; their undue exercise brings pain, for which there is no remedy but repose; and that not the repose of inactivity, but of pleasurable excitement: hence some of our faculties have pleasure for their sole object and end. Of what other use is laughter and song; the love of beauty; or the sense of humour and delight in its excitation, which always accompanies a strong and well-balanced nature. These things are distinctive of man; no less so than are his responsibilities and duties. Man is a laughing animal, as well as a thinking one, and the exercise of the humorous and pleasure-loving faculties are not inconsistent with sobriety and seriousness. Shakspeare, who gave us "Bottom the Weaver," and "Dogberry, and Verges;"

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gave us also "Hamlet," and "Isabella," and "Viola;" and Hood, who wrote the ballads of "Ben Battle," "Sally Brown," and "Nelly Gray;" wrote also the "Song of the Shirt," and "The Lady's Dream;" and in "Miss Kilmansegg," the laughter is from eyes wet with tears at the human sorrows, upon which is set up the golden idol of avarice.

This sense of amusement occupies the same ground, in some respects, with our tastes—the love of the beautiful, and delight in it for its own sake—the desire of the eye to see, and of the ear to hear: and so God has connected all our functions, in their exercise, with enjoyment. Nothing in us is quite barren of pleasure and joy, and we have faculties that have no possible exercise except in this direction: and this is necessary, that amusement and recreation, in the few allowable lighter hours of life, may enable us to do our duty—to brave danger, and carry our share of responsibility, care, and sorrow, during those many hours which we must give to the achievement of character, and the earnest purpose of existence. To repress constantly this healthy craving for amusement leads to gloomy views of everything; to nervous irritability of temper; to asceticism and uncharity in religion; to wasted health; to deteriorated intellect; often to the mad-house or the grave. Amusement is not merely defensible as an allowable thing. I am not now apologising for it as an occasional innocent indulgence, or pardonable weakness, but insisting upon it as a part of duty, to neglect which is to imperil safety and repose. And I defend the pure acted drama—the Theatre—as the most effective and attractive form which amusement takes. I admit that pleasure is always in danger of being overdone by a certain class of men, and that the very attractiveness and efficiency of the Theatre, as an amusement, may prove a snare to such. It could not be otherwise; herein consists its very power as amusement, and also

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its discipline, of which all amusement must partake more or less: but this objection, like all I have ever heard against the Theatre, proves too much, and thereby proves nothing at all. The same objection will hold against eating, and drinking, and money-getting, dressing, and sleeping, and even against the external observances of piety and religion: to all these there is a dangerous side, but they are not therefore wicked or prohibited things. Like all other things, pleasure has its time and its place in relation to the more serious concerns of life; and what that time and place is, each man's conscience must decide for himself, and he only will err greatly, who fails to apply his conscience to determine the quantity and quality of his amusement, as well as to the right and wrong of all other things.

I suppose the history of most families, through two or three generations, would show that the tendency to amusement, and to take the Theatre as the most perfect form of amusement, can never long be successfully resisted. The children or grandchildren of puritan parents revert to it as a kind of staple commodity or ever-recurring type of pleasure. The process is easy and natural. As the children grow up, the parents find that some substitute for the Theatre is necessary, and they allow, perhaps, the reading of plays, recitations, charades, secular music, carpet dances, and perhaps even public concerts, and the opera, and other such like compromises with ascetic piety; and when the children grow up, they find themselves led to the tree of the forbidden fruit by those who have forbidden it, and by the very means which have been adopted to guard them from its danger: and if pleasure has been absolutely forbidden or greatly restricted, the result is often of the most lamentable character. The healthy desire for amusement, and a due amount of pleasurable excitement, can never be long repressed without grave risk. It takes its revenge at length, either by breaking all bounds, and rushing into wild license,

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not even stopping short at vice; or it preys upon the imagination, weakening the intellect, and endangering the reason: hence it is, probably, that puritan and presbyterian Scotland, is characterized as much by drunkenness, unchastity, and illegitimacy, as it is by ascetic piety, and conventional goodness. Even within the past month, in one of its most densely populated cities, good men have been actually obliged to close a church, because so many young people resorted to it for questionable, if not immoral purposes. Hence, also, it is, that religious fanaticism, and theological purism, give more victims by far to the mad-house, than the mere love of pleasure unaccompanied by actual vice.

If it be objected, "that the tendency of pleasure in any degree, is necessarily to draw away the mind from God, and goodness, and serious things," I simply deny it; and point for confirmation to the fact that the wickedest people are not those that are the most pleasure-loving in this sense, even when they carry it to a quite reprehensible degree; nor do they exert the most mischievous influence in the world. They are far outstripped in actual sin, and in bad influence, by the reckless money-getter, who does not care for pleasure at all; or by the ambitious man, who climbs to distinction at whatever injustice to his fellow-men. I do not deny the wrong of pleasure to excess, or its fascination over weak and indolent minds; but, I affirm, that in these respects it only occupies the same ground with many other things; and in this, as in others, it is true that we are to "use the world as not abusing it, knowing that the fashion of this world passeth away."

I have looked, hitherto, at such objections only as can be brought against the Theatre in common with all other public amusement, and with pleasures in general: but to the Theatre especially, it is objected, "that the Drama has been a corrupting kind of literature, and much of it is even so still." This, I grant, with sorrow

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and shame; but is it all so? or need any of it have been so? Is corruption inseparable from the Drama? It would seem not; for all old dramas are not corrupt, and few modern English ones are so, either in fact or tendency. This objection also proves too much. The greatest English dramatists of the past times, as of the present, are free from this stain. It is not in Ben Jonson, or Shakspeare, except slightly, and that to a far less extent than was common in the ordinary literature of their time; and what there is, is of a kind far more appreciable to our nicer sense of propriety, than it was to the ruder taste of their own age; and they are rather to be praised for their superiority to the morality of their own time, than to be blamed for their slight infringements upon our more refined manners. No writer has given us purer women than Shakspeare; they were saints without having first been Magdalenes, which is more than can be said of all the saints of the Church. John Home, who was a clergyman, wrote plays which are perfectly unexceptionable. And I do not know of a single line in the works of the pure-minded Sheridan Knowles which a Madonna would wish to obliterate. If we must reject the Drama upon the ground that much of it has been impure and corrupting, what is to hinder us from rejecting other literature on the same ground? Must I cast away Milton, Herbert, Cowper, the Brownings, Miss Procter, and Tennyson, because Moore and Byron have written what no man ought to allow to live after him, even if he were so wicked and foolish as to write it at all? Must I banish from my library Thackeray, Dickens, Miss Mulock, and Kingsley, in fiction; because of "Tom Jones," "Colonel Jack," and "Moll Flanders," and some modern things both English and French, which are worse than even those? We have only to apply the objection to other things which will bear it quite as well as the Drama, to see how futile and absurd it is. We must not forget that the things best

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in themselves are ever open to the worst abuses; and that to see a thing prostituted to the lowest uses, is the surest guarantee we could possibly have beforehand, that it is capable of lofty application to the indestructible wants of man. Some of our so-called "religious literature" has been, and still is, vile in the last extreme; reeking with bigotry, malice, hate, and all uncharitableness; so that no man can touch it without soiling his hands; but for all that, religious literature is a great and vital fact. The Drama in England arose with the Church, and no plays since have been more blasphemous and obscene than the old miracle plays, which were acted mainly by ecclesiastics, upon the festivals of the Church; but it would not therefore be just to charge all the past impurities of the Drama upon the Church, nor is it just to infer that because some Dramas have been abominable in themselves, and pernicious in their tendency, that it is true of all. This is mere bigotry; and can any amount of bigotry or hostility to dramatic literature, in the avowed interests of religion and morality, whip Shakspeare out of the world? I suppose not.

"But the acted Drama," it is said, "is there any possible defence of that? Has it not been the hot-bed of vice, intemperance, and licentiousness? Has it not glossed over sin unreproved, and mocked at goodness; made villainy successful; applauded roguery; excused, if not commended, the betrayer of female innocence? Has it not set at nought parental authority; made purity and justice contemptible; profaned religion; blasphemed God; and, by its indecency and obscenity, outraged all manners and morality? And the actors and actresses, are they not persons abandoned of all conscience, and reckless of all morals; outcasts, not by the common consent of society merely, but by their own want of character?" All this, and much more, is said of the acted Drama. It has been charged with leading

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youth astray in all manner of ways, and presenting a standing temptation to evil courses. I do not deny that there has been a good deal of truth in this, and may be still, as it respects many Theatres. But it is easy for people who have seldom or never seen for themselves, and who, moreover, have a case to make out, to overstate things on the side of their own impressions. Besides, all this is foreign to the question. It would tend to a far more practical issue to ask, "Are they who go to the Theatre much or any worse, as a rule, than they who stay away?" But even this would not determine the question whether the evil deplored be inherent or accidental to the Theatre. Is a pure Theatre conceivable in thought and possible in practice, with plays, actors, scenery, and conduct, all consistent with the purest morals and the most refined manners, and which should nevertheless retain its character as an attractive and efficient amusement unimpaired, nay, rather increased? Who will say that this is not possible? Then if it be, it is attainable, and we should seek to realise it; which surely could be done with far less expenditure of time and labour than have been fruitlessly wasted in trying to annihilate it. What is there to prevent this being speedily realised? I know of nothing inconsistent with it, either in the nature of things, or in the constitution of society. Are Theatres the only places where wicked things are done or countenanced; and would you destroy every "Sodom and Gomorrah," because, in your short-sighted vision, the good did not predominate over the evil? If the good is inherent, and appears to be a real want in man; while the wickedness is only accidental, then the question is clear; cast out the demon, and let the Theatre sit at the feet of pure morality, for its service, clothed and in its right mind.

I do not deny the attractiveness of the Theatre; that is its chief strength as an amusement; but who will say

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that men are attracted to it only by the bad connected with it? This is surely not that charity which "thinketh no evil." The thing to do is not to denounce it, but to purify it; and I well know that there are now Theatres, in London, and elsewhere, where the management scrupulously guards the interests of morality, not only in the pieces performed, but in lessening, as far as can be done, the peculiar temptations incident to an actor's life. Still it should always be borne in mind, that the Theatre has all along exhibited the existing state of society, rather than created that state; and that the universal purification of the Theatre, as of all other organisations, broadly considered, can only keep pace with the purification of society.

Before I proceed, allow me to sum up the advantages which I should expect from a pure and well-regulated Theatre.

It would supply us with amusement of the completest kind. There would be good music certainly, but more. There might be dancing, but that would not be all. The Theatre is wider than the Concert, the Opera, or the Ball Room. It appeals to a larger class than any of these, while it has more or less the features of them all: and, to crown all, history and life are acted before us in living reality: old scenes and occurrences, old habits and customs, old times and dress, are all again before our eyes; and, in the swift succession of events, we seem to live a life-time in a few hours. It is of all amusements the most complete, the most varied, the most universal in its application; and is readily appreciated by the uncultured, no less than by the well-informed. The unthinking sight-seer, is attracted chiefly by the spectacle. He sees Hamlet and the Ghost; the King and Queen; the old garrulous dotard Polonius, and his mad daughter Ophelia; and admires the gaudy trappings, the scenery, and the accessories: while the philosopher sees guilt peering

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through all its disguises; hears the stealthy step of Nemesis heralding the fast-coming doom, and wonders at the genius which marks the delicate oscillations of a great mind, between superstition and philosophy; between madness and love; between filial affection and revenge. The child laughs at the clown, from its mother's arms; or listens, with a puzzled merriment, to the sententious fool in his motley dress, with cap and bells; or shrinks in fear from the simulated madness of Lear or Hamlet: while the grown and thoughtful man says, "This fool has matter in him." "This is madness with a method in't." And they take home, the one pleasant pictures and happy memories; the other, if not a wiser heart, a relaxed mind and a rested brain.

Such an amusement may be uplifting, often will be; but that is not to be demanded of it as an inseparable condition. It is sufficient if it be amusement, and be pure. It will, if well carried out, be sure to be refining, and more or less instructive. It will also be comparatively cheap, and this is a great thing for the poor and uneducated, who, for many reasons, need amusement even more than those of ampler means and culture, for they have neither so many home luxuries, nor so many mental resources. The life of the toiler is hard and cheerless enough, and though "Mechanics' Institutes, may be, and are, estimable things; yet these people need amusement also, and for them it must be cheap. Such are the advantages we might reasonably expect from a purified Theatre.

Speaking now of the Theatre in general, how is it to be made thus pure and useful. It must be considered and recognised by society as a legitimate and allowable amusement. It must no longer be put under the ban of the Church, or considered as at variance with common decency and public morals. Nor must attendance there be counted a sin, or an act by which a man

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compromises his respectability, his religious integrity, his fair Christian name, or any part of his social character as a man, and for which he is liable to be put under an ecclesiastical stigma.

The vocation of the Player must be raised in the estimation of the public, and especially of all good Christian men, to the common level of allowable and honourable professions, in which a man may toil to win his own and his children's bread, leading the while a blameless and irreproachable life; nor necessarily forgetful of his duties to his fellow-men, and reverence and worship towards God: and which a woman may follow, without sacrificing her maidenly modesty, or the crown of her womanly dignity. Make a class of men into involuntary outcasts, on whatever grounds not actually vicious or criminal, and you degrade them unjustly; in return for which they scorn you, and naturally take their revenge by behaving in a lawless way. This was precisely what was done in the case of the earliest secular players; who were first repudiated out of jealousy by the priestly performers of miracle plays, and afterwards persecuted in all petty ways, and, for a time, were even denied the rights of citizenship while living, and Christian burial when dead; and, as they had to wander to and fro in their vocation, without a home or settled place, they became, like all such rovers, lawless and licentious, addicted to petty theft and general villiany: and still later, when for protection they grouped themselves around some nobleman, calling themselves his servants, they were for the most part fawning sycophants to their patron, and consented to be used for all kinds of doubtful purposes. This was unfortunate for them, not only as individuals, but as a class; for they lost caste in public opinion, which they have not yet fully regained. An actor is now but too often considered—I hope with

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general injustice—to be a kind of tolerated nuisance in society; and, however clever and industrious in his profession, yet a man with whom a gentleman of character should not be seen walking in the street, or be known to associate. And the Actress, I almost fear to say what the general pious public think of her, I am sure, in many cases, falsely; but it is something like this, that she is the most objectionable and shameless of her sex, who seeks to protect her immoralities from the public scrutiny by the thin veil of a so-called profession. It is time all this were altered and done away with. I am sure that the arduous and wearing life of actors and actresses is beset with sufficient temptations, dangers, and excitements, to make the deeper work of life—that of being earnest-minded men and women—hard enough to achieve, without crediting them with vices and follies of which they may not be guilty, and of which, in all justice, they ought to be held innocent until they forfeit their claim to the protection of public confidence. Why should they, of all people, be thus unjustly dealt with, and considered to have left decency on the threshold of their profession? They have to live, much as the lawyer and the religious teacher have to live, by appealing to the intellect, the heart, and the imagination of men. What if their object be only amusement, instead of justice or religion? Their temptations are not therefore less, but greater; and those men and women who through such an arduous trial, win for themselves an honourable name, and a character unstained by reproach, are worthy of all praise. And it is, surely, the duty of the Church to throw around these, no less than others, the sacred mantle of her protection.

All really objectionable things in theatrical amusements must be resolutely put down. Of course, the first performance of this duty is with the Manager;

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if he neglect it, then the public must swiftly teach him his mistake, in a way which he will not soon forget. What we have mainly to do with, is the public performance of the Drama; not the private lives of either managers or actors, unless they become shamelessly and notoriously immoral, in which case, it is quite competent for the public to express its disapprobation; for the public morals are in some degree in the hands of the actor, as they are in those of the clergyman, the lawyer, or the doctor. But we cannot in the present state of society, expect every good actor or actress to be a good man or woman, any more than every good lawyer, or doctor, to be a good man: but we have a right to demand of all, that they fulfil their public vocations with no detriment to public virtue and morality. The same applies to the managers. You cannot expect every tradesman to be a good man, but he must conduct his business morally and honestly.

We must not expect too much of the Theatre; and I should only injure my case by claiming too much for it. Its primary business is amusement; and the players must, in the main, paint society as it is, or was, at the time they seek to represent. "They are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time." "This is the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and now, was, and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to shew virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure." We have no right to demand of it more than this; as, that it shall teach religion or give instruction, but it must amuse innocently and holily. Incidentally, it may do much to shew goodness as loveable, and vice as hateful; and to indicate the connection between each and its appropriate sanctions; but only incidentally. These things borne in mind and acted upon by managers, actors, and the public, would soon make an impure stage a thing of the past.

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But it still remains to be asked, "To whom, mainly, does the work of regeneration belong?" I have no intention of exonerating managers and actors from all responsibility in the matter, for some of it fairly belongs to them; they are men and women like the rest of us, with souls and consciences, which it is their duty to acquit before man and God, in seeing that society suffers no detriment from the exercise of their functions. They, also, have character to win as the work of life, which can only be done by applying the rule of conscience to their daily occupation and influence over others, as well as to all things else. But, allowing for all this, the past and existing evils connected with the theatre are not of their creation, and must not, in the first instance be charged upon them. A great deal of the responsibility of this rests, as it always has rested, with the more moral and religious part of the community. If we give anything up which is in itself allowable, to be conducted and enjoyed solely by irreligious and immoral men, what wonder if it foster immorality, and scoff at religion? Suppose we were to give up our churches to be lectured in only by infidels, and attended only by unbelievers, what would they be but the nurseries of infidelity? Give a thing up, no matter how good in itself, to the devil and wicked men, and it will perforce become devilish and wicked. Just so with the theatre; if it be bad, and has been much worse, the blame lies mainly upon the religious people who have left it to the management and patronage of the irreligious and immoral: and if, occasionally, both managers and actors have combined to purify a particular theatre, and make it unexceptionable, they have failed oftener than they have succeeded, for lack of the countenance and support of good people, and have been dragged down by the low tastes and depraved appetites of their audiences, perhaps to a lower level than before.

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The improvement of late years evident in the general conduct of Theatres, is doubtless owing, as much to the elevation which has taken place in the tone of society, which has demanded a purer Drama, as to the slight yielding which has been manifested in the ascetic prejudices of religious men.

Let us look for a moment at the nature of a Theatre. It is a place of public amusement, where the drama is performed. It is kept by some person or persons, as a mode of livelihood, and that livelihood has to be won by appealing to the taste of the people as it is; not to the ideal, but to the actual; and to lift it very far above the intelligence or the taste of its patrons would be to defeat its own ends The work of the Theatre is primarily to amuse. It is only incidentally that it affects manners or morals. In fact, the Theatre does not determine the morals and manners of its patrons, but receives its complexion and quality from them; for it only exists by giving them that for which they have a taste; and if moral and decent people would go, nothing that could offend them would appear, for the simple reason that it would not pay. I have no doubt that the managers of Theatres have often to outrage their own taste, and degrade their art in their own eyes, in order to meet the taste of the public. The extremely sensational Dramas which have been popular for the last few years, in which high art and the most refined amusement have been sacrificed to mere spectacle, cannot have been pleasant to either managers or actors, as they certainly are not complimentary to the public taste. They are expensive to managers, and degrading to good actors; for the actor is reduced to being simply an illustrator of the scenery and its mechanism, instead of these being mere accessories to the actor's power. And yet, what is to be done? If the public will have them, I suppose it must, until the revival of a purer taste shall

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call forth a higher art. We ought not to expect, then, that the Theatre can reform or elevate itself; the impulse to these must first come from without, in the demand of a higher and purer taste on the part of the public. The Theatre, in this respect, is like a draper's shop. If long mantles and crinolines are the fashion, the draper sells crinolines and long mantles whatever may be his private opinion about the poetry of dress. And so if good men and women went to the Theatre, and demanded a good and pure acted drama, purely performed, the managers for their own sakes, would put nothing which could offend on the stage. The same is true also of actors and actresses. They have to earn their living by amusing people; and they give what the people like best. I cannot but hope, for the credit of humanity in general, and the profession in particular, that there are few who so love evil for its own sake, that they would rather act an immodest or immoral part than otherwise. Besides, actors are generally ambitious of public praise, their success depends upon it; and a desire to please will be sure to animate them for the sake of their own interest, if not for any higher reason. Let the public show displeasure at indecent gesture, immodest inuendo, and flippant sneering at goodness, and they will not be repeated; let them be applauded, and probably they will occur again. The knowledge that the audience was partly composed of good and religious people, would keep performers of loose morals and no conscience upon their good behaviour; whilst to those who were anxious to do right, as well as to impart pleasure, it would be an indescribable comfort and support.

True Religion is the salt of the earth, of the Theatre no less than other things, and I have no question, that the worst conducted place would improve at once, if only ten earnest and good men were to go, and persistently disapprove of all evil, and sanction all good.

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I grant that it is a great evil, that an institution like the Theatre, and a large class of men and women, should be prepared, on demand, to pander to the worst follies and vices of society. I have no apology, much less any defence for this. I only wish to impress you with this thought; that even if this were true in all its nakedness, which it is not, the blame of it would belong quite as much to society, as to the Drama and the Theatre; for such a state of things never could have come about, if good men had not given over this form of amusement to the powers of evil. The Church has removed from it the ægis of her protection against the inroads of license, and has thereby done grave injustice to herself, and to society. Why has the Church been so infatuated? Why is it so still? It has faithlessly cast away what it ought to have protected and cherished; the guardianship of the purely human and indestructible instinct of amusement. And in casting off the Theatre, it has cast off from its influence that which especially requires it, and those men and women who most need its safeguard, from the many temptations of a difficult and exciting profession: and has cast off also, a large class of the pleasure-loving and the young, who cannot be kept away from the Theatre by any amount of ecclesiastical denunciation or misrepresentation.

The history of the last five hundred years shows clearly, that the Church cannot put down the Theatre. Is it not now time to try if she cannot purify it? Great credit is due to the Theatre, that in spite of the Church, and without the slightest encouragement, it has, in obedience to the common extra-church morality of our time, done so much to make itself creditable and respectable.

It is a fatal policy on the part of the Church to cut itself off from anything that is truly human. That

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it has done this so long, and in so many ways, is a sufficient cause for the fact, that large classes of men, of all degrees of culture, care nothing for the Church at this day; not because they are immoral or irreligious, but because they see that humanity, morality, and religion, are all far from being bounded, or even represented, by the Church as it is. "If the visible church and the clergy would not see themselves left like the Pyramids of the desert, monuments of a mighty population, a vast dominion, and an extinct civilization, which once surrounded them, but have now left them to be slowly buried in the dreary sand, out of the line of the present commerce, uses, and interests of the world—the gigantic tombs of forgotten kings and priests; it becomes them to take again the place they have lost at the head of the real concerns of society, advising men in the business and pleasures of the world, and protecting them therein from contamination: the guides, friends, sympathizers, and helpers of men, in their attempts to amuse, instruct, and save themselves. I am a servant, not merely of religion, but of the Church; and hope to live and die in this service; but if there is to be a great gulf between the church and the world as between heaven and hell: minister of Christ, as I am, I would rather take my place and part with the world, than with the Church; with common humanity, than with any elect portion of it; with confessed sinners, than with self-assumed saints: for I believe that Christ, who is the light of the world, and not of the Church alone, is more permanently a resident with the common heart, and fortunes and feelings of mankind at large, than of any fraction of humanity, however select, or self-appropriative of his name and patronage."

The Theatre, under the watchful care of good men, might do much, and doubtless would, to awaken love of goodness and hatred of evil; and to instruct whilst

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it amused; but I do not insist upon this. Amusement it would give us. We have need of this, and a right to demand it, and to expect that it be such as we can take our sons and daughters to share, without fear of contamination.

I insist thus upon amusement as the primary aim of the Theatre, because all attempts, of set purpose, to combine amusement and instruction are failures; either making all play into real work, or producing the impression that play is everything, and there is no real work to be done.

It has sometimes been said, that all the good which could be obtained from a pure Theatre, may be gleaned by reading in private the best works of the dramatic authors; leaving the powers of the intellect and imagination to more than abundantly compensate for the "sock and buskin" the scenery and action of the stage. I think not; at least, not whilst we are what we are, with senses to be exercised as well as imagination and intellect. The Theatre and the acted Drama sustain precisely the same relation to ideal enjoyment, as the Church and worship sustain to abstract religion, considered apart from all formal observances: and I do not think it likely that, in the way of amusement, men will reject the Theatre for a merely imaginative and intellectual enjoyment of the drama: until they are sufficiently spiritualised to worship God in spirit and in truth, without the external help of churches, with prayers, and songs; sermons, and holy ceremonies.

I have thus spoken my opinions freely and honestly. I do not profess to have exhausted the subject. There are many current objections to the Theatre which I have not noticed, as there are many advantages possible to it, to which I have not referred. For yourselves you must think over the whole subject and decide what course you will take. I am not your

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judge as you are not mine. I charge you do no violence to your consciences, and do not uncharitably judge others. What you do in this matter, do it intelligently, conscientiously, openly, and without apology. Your business as christian men and women is not to bow to the public sentiment of the world, or the Church, but to create it. Do right, honestly, openly, fearlessly, and leave the rest with God. Whether, therefore, you eat or drink, or amuse, or be amused, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God; which is best served and illustrated when we maintain the due balance of all our powers; the due exercise of all our functions; and regulate duty and pleasure alike by the sacred law of conscience, from which there is no appeal.

WILLIAM MORGAN, KIRKGATE, BRADFORD, YORKS.

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